CLOSE ENCOUNTERS
Matthew 22:34-40
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The lawyer wanted to test Him, to see if He knew the correct answers, but also, we have to assume, to trip Him up, to trap Him in some embarassing misinterpretation of orthodox doctrine. "Which is the great commandment in the law?" he asked. There was really very little Jesus could say except, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." Everyone knew that. Jesus passed the first and most elementary test of orthodoxy. But then He pulled an obscure verse out of the book of Leviticus: "A second is like it," He said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." These two are the essence of our religion.

Notice that here, as elsewhere, Jesus insists on moving from the abstract to the specific. It is difficult to prescribe or to measure the love an individual has for God. The rituals of religion provide a framework: people prayed, fasted and obeyed the law. But ultimately, the love a person has for God is a matter of heart, soul and mind - those internal, private spaces, accessable to no one else. Love for God sometimes proceeds no farther than an intellectual abstraction. And so, beside that great admonition Jesus laid another one, of equal weight: love your neighbor - the physical personage of another - : love him - not abstractly, theoretically, but as you love yourself.

Notice, also, that here, as elsewhere, Jesus insists that you can't do one apart from the other: that in the final sense the only way you and I have of loving God is the neighbor who needs us. The author of the Epistles of John put it negatively: "If a man says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar."

And notice the subtlety of the metaphor which has been repeated so often: "your neighbor as yourself." The first century Jews were far less abstract than we: all their verbs were active: they knew what it meant to love. The question His metaphor provoked for them was: "Who is my neighbor?" He responded elsewhere with the parable of the Good Samaritan. We, on the other hand, are inclined to focus on the whole matter of loving the self. What in the world does that mean? A dangerous idea, indeed! Put ethically in the Golden Rule it can mean, as cynics point out, "You share your heroin with me and I'll share mine with you." Or, put existentially, as it is with monotonous regularity, "You do your own thing and I'll do mine", a rationale for unbridled egocentricity.

Like fire, love of self can either warm or destroy. Christian theology has always been very wary of it. In fact, our favorite definition of human sin is pride, self-centeredness, exclusive love of self. Our favorite diagnosis of the human condition is that each of us is like the football players of all ages who, when their team does something well, run off the field, index fingers extended, shouting, "We're number one!" Each of us, Christian theology maintains, wants to be the focal point of a little universe: we can't love God or anyone else very well, for that matter, because we are too busy fawning over ourselves. Love of self is that from which we need to be delivered, not encouraged to expand. And so the human self has received skeptical and sometimes very rough handling at the hands of Christian theology. At its extremes it has been reduced to a complex of guilt feelings, with an emphasis on sinfulness so colorful and thorough that Christian people have often felt that the only thing they could say to God is "I'm sorry".

I can't believe that Jesus wanted that. He was too happy, too at one with His own humanity, to have wanted to be responsible for reducing His followers into guilt ridden neurotics. He said, "Love your neighbor as yourself", but He didn't mean

self-indulgent, self-centered love. In fact, He tacked that statement onto an admonition to love God with heart, mind and soul. It isn't mushy sentiment at all: if it's God-defined love it's strong and demanding and accepting and forgiving and life giving.

The difficulty we have here is with the subtlety. Jesus meant to evoke an image of a big and awesome love. But as J.B.Phillips reminded us, our God is often too small, and so is our love. W.H.Auden, in For the Time Being, has Herod pray, "O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave thy heavens and come down to our earth of water clocks and hedges. Become our uncle...Look after Baby, amuse Grandfather, escort Madam to the opera, help Willy with his homework, introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love oursleves."

If, as Jesus proposed, love of neighbor has to do with love of self: and if love of self has anything to do with love of God, the God about whom we are talking had better be worth loving or the whole structure collapses. Thus the initial and fundamental difficulty. A God we can discuss and love is often fashioned in our image, too small, too familiar, almost trivial. In an article on the Episcopal Church in this month's Harpers under the title, "Trendier Than Thou", Paul Seabury writes, "So the deity could be tailored to the current fashion: a nice, cool, relaxed God could be procured, as presented in the theological best seller of 1965, 'Are You Running With Me, Jesus?' Now he would situationally jog. God would be a friend, and Christianity a celebration of life." (p.46).

At the heart of our Lord's position is a God who is God, transcendent, sovereign, majestic, awesome, into whose presence people properly come in fear and trembling: a God who is friend and father but also creator and judge: a God who is always ready to forgive, but who loves us so much He wants us to be all that we are capable of being. To love that God is something other than an emotional tickle. And to talk about love of self in the same breath, as Jesus did, is to mean something more than petty self-indulgence. The danger in loving one's neighbor as one's self, I would submit, is in not loving one's self enough.

Jesus had not read I'm OK, You're OK, but there is a sense in which He anticipated Transactional Analysis by twenty centuries. We know now that people with low self-esteem are in trouble; that the absence of self-regard is a debilitating, disabling emotional condition: that "I'm OK, You're just so-so" really means "I'm not very sure about myself". We know now that a major psychological dynamic for many, if not most of us, is a sense that we are not OK; that we bear that burden all our lives and engage in an endless series of games designed to prove to others and ourselves the unprovable, namely that "I am OK".

Reuel Howe wrote, "Anyone who works with people knows how common it is for men and women to have predominantly disparaging feelings toward themselves. They cannot believe in themselves or that other men, or even God accept them...It is difficult to find a self-rejecting person who does much in the way of accepting others." (Man's Need and God's Action, p.104).

"Love your neighbor as yourself?" This, then, is elementary. We can't even use the vocabulary unless we have some kind of esteem for ourselves. Love for another person isn't love at all if it doesn't grow out of love of self. In marriage, or sex, if the relationship is structured to bolster a weak self, or prove masculinity, or femininity, or massage a self-doubting ego, someone is using and someone else is

being used and love isn't happening at all. The simple fact is that love for others isn't possible until we come to terms with ourselves, and begin to appreciate who we are, and to value our own special gifts. We can't give a thing unless we believe we have something to give.

A line out of Hamlet commends itself:

> "This above all: to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man." (Act I, Scene 3).

The relevance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that it addresses, in our time, our deepest pain and most urgent need. The literature of the day describes it as alienation, isolation, separation; the whole kaleidescope of human relations from Parent to Child, to Masters and Johnson, dominates the book shelves.

A feature article in New York Magazine earlier this year, laid it all out in the title, "Loneliness: The New York Condition". (3/20/78) and described the American urban dilemma as follows: "Your closest neighbors know that they are not supposed to talk to you (this is one of our greatest traditions), nor, happily, do they have any wish to do so. People on the street do not exchange greetings: no one, unless specifically invited, will interfere with your life."

Even in romance we seem to be afraid of intimacy and the vulnerability of total commitment. A New York Times Magazine editorial focused on the numbing sociological jargon with which we now describe romantic love. "Ed and Jane announce that they relate beautifully and communicate gratifyingly. Instead of a lover's quarrel they explain that they are not relating and communicating." The writer observes, "It takes a very cool pair of cats to talk about the grandest of passions as though it were only an exercise in sociology. Imagine Dante filling pages about the satisfactory nature of communicating with Beatrice, or Juliet raving on through five acts about her fulfilling relationship with Romeo." (N.Y.Times, Magazine, 3/19/78).

We are searching for relationship, for community, for love - if you will. It doesn't require a very astute observer of our culture to conclude that it has become an obsession with us, that the search is painful and basic to our humanity and our happiness.

We are learning, as we search, some very old lessons: that there is a life-giving and life-enriching power about human love that borders on the mystical. We are learning that to love a child helpfully and honestly is to affirm and respect who that child is, positively, supportively - not negatively and critically. We are learning ever so slowly that children don't become better people by being made to feel bad about themselves. I was delighted to read a vignette about two literary societies some years ago at the University of Wisconsin. The men's society, full of bright and brilliant young journalists called themselves The Stranglers. At each of their meetings one would present a short story and the others would criticize it brutally, mercilessly. An alternative society was formed for women students. Known as The Wranglers, this group encouraged all efforts. Twenty years later an alumnus analyzed the results. "Of all the bright young talent in the (men's society); not one had made a literary reputation of any kind. Out of the alternative group had come six successful writers, some of national prominence, led by Marjorie Rawlings, who wrote The Yearling." (A Touch of Wonder, Arthur Gordon, p.51-2).

There is a creative power in love. And a healing power. Karl Meninger once told a class of psychiatric residents that the most important part of the treatment process was "diagnosis" - which means "knowing through and through." He would have his students understand that healing depends on "the interested effort to know the patients fully, in all their joys and sorrows, ups and downs, highs and lows..." (H. Nouwen, Reaching Out, p. 66-7).

"Love your neighbor as you love yourself." There is a creative power and a healing power and it isn't confined to the psychiatrist's couch. We can help one another more than we realize simply by listening, by being interested in what another person is trying to tell us, by not interrupting with a better story of our own. Sometimes I think our greatest failure in love is precisely here. A dozen times a day people reach out - wanting simply to share a joy, a disappointment, a hurt. And, too frequently, we either don't have time - or are so preoccupied with ourselves, that we interrupt their story with one of our own.

To love others strongly, as we should love ourselves - and as we are called to love God - begins with basic respect. It is to grant the other the space to be. It is to allow and accept the other for who he or she is. It is to sacrifice all the manipulative devices we use to transform others into what we desire. Rilke said it eloquently, "Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other." (H. Nouwen, Ibid, p.31).

It is to listen: to try to feel what the other is feeling: to try to see the world through his eyes: it is to refrain, often, from responding verbally in order to allow the other to tell his story. It is to accept and forgive: not in weak indulgence: but in honest love that sees more potential in the other than he or she is able, for the moment, to see: in honest love that grants the humanity and therefore the imperfections of the other. And it is to express it, to say it: to learn, all over again, the words, "I love you", "I need you", "I care about you".

We come, in conclusion, full circle. We began thinking about religious rules and how to fulfill religious obligations, but now we are talking about basic human needs. We began thinking about law, but now we're talking about grace. We began with our responsibility to other people, but now we're talking about our salvation.

To love is not simply to please God: it is to be alive. Walt Whitman wrote:

> "Whoever walks a furlong without sympathy
> walks to his own funeral drest in his own shroud." (Song of Myself)

To know oneself loved of others is to be whole and free and able, then, to value self and love self. And because of that it is to be able to love them back.

To know oneself loved of God, is what we mean by salvation. It is to be saved. It is to be alive and whole and free. It is to know, finally, that I can - because I am who I am - love God with all my heart, and all my soul, and all my mind. It is to know that I can be part of a miracle: part of what God intends for His creation. Because in Jesus Christ He has loved me, I can - with strength and integrity, love my neighbor as myself. Amen.

Father, give us strength and grace to love. Keep us from that smallness of heart that refuses to acknowledge Your love for us. Give us, rather, gratitude and joy - and love for You and ourselves and one another. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.